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## Closeness and distance in Pakistani transnational cousin marriage

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### Closeness and cousin marriage

Around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, I was conducting ethnographic research on marriages between British Pakistanis and Pakistani nationals, which are often consanguinous. This kind of transnational marriage is common – around half of British Pakistanis have a spouse from Pakistan. The majority of these marriages are between cousins or more distant members of extended kinship networks.

Divisions between ‘love’ and ‘arranged’ in these transnational cousin marriages can be blurred – whilst many are arranged by parents keen to find a compatible match for their child and to strengthen ties with distant family, some are first mooted by young people who have met at family functions in Pakistan and asked their parents to arrange the match.

My research has shown that the transnational nature of these marriages can reinforce reasons for selecting a spouse from within networks of kin, with risks of excessive cultural difference or ‘being used for a passport’ enhancing the attractiveness of a match with the child of a familiar and trusted family member. But many of the young British men and women with whom I conducted research felt somewhat awkward about discussing the consanguinity in their marriage – one saying he hadn’t been entirely sure marrying such a relative (in his case a first cousin once removed) was even legal. Public discussion about cousin marriage has often focussed on increased rates of abnormalities in children born from such unions (although this increased risk is only, it should be noted, to the level of risk affecting white British mothers from their mid thirties). My discussions with young British Pakistanis suggested that in experiential terms, distance can again play a role in increasing the acceptability of a consanguineous marriage proposal – unlike the cousins growing up around the corner in Britain, those in Pakistan may have been more rarely encountered, and so feel less problematically ‘close’. In other words, physical distance can both incentivise consanguinous marriages, and create space for a marital relationship within the bonds of family.

Issues of closeness and distance are not just features of Pakistani marriages involving international migration. Although kin marriage is not uncommon in Pakistan, it nevertheless challenges notions of separation between the two ‘sides’ at weddings and in future relationships between in-laws.

Pakistani weddings are often large affairs with hundreds of guests, the women in particular dressed in their finest clothes. There are conventionally three main days: the *mehndi* when the bride and

groom are traditionally feted separately; the day of the marriage itself when the *barat* (procession of the groom and his relatives) arrive - the marriage contract may be signed on this day or may have been signed earlier; and the *walima* celebration hosted by the groom's family once the bride has joined her husband. After a description of the central day of a wedding I attended in Pakistan, the remainder of this piece discusses some of the ways in which wedding rituals create opposition between the families of the bride and groom before returning to more individual negotiations of closeness and distance.

### **Iram's wedding day**

Iram, from the UK, was in her ancestral village in rural Pakistan for her wedding to Hamid. The couple were cousins and had met on previous visits by Iram's family to Pakistan. Both were happy with the match. After the wedding they would apply for a visa for Hamid to join Iram in the UK. After the *mendhi* celebration the previous day, the day of the marriage itself had arrived.

The women from the beauty parlour were late. The *barat* (groom's party) were due to arrive at eleven, but by twelve there was still no sign of the women who were to dress Iram's hair, do her makeup, and help arrange her wedding clothes and jewellery. Her sister and cousin got themselves ready, Shabanna struggling with safety pins to ensure that her sari didn't show any skin around her waist. She hadn't worn a sari before, but luckily the innovation of stitching the pleats onto a belt, which gave it a fashionable slim-fit, eliminated the need for skilful folding. Shanaz had lent me a red and gold *lehnga* (skirt with a tunic top) bought in Britain for £45 but which all three girls had rejected, preferring to buy much more elaborate and up-to-date outfits locally. Iram set about painting her own nails in the burgundy colour of her wedding *lehnga*, applying gold transfers to the varnish.

Eventually the beauticians arrived, and I went downstairs to defrost my toes. It was a crisp winter day and they were turning white in my thin *lehnga* and wedding *kusse*.<sup>i</sup> Unfortunately this meant that I missed the arrival of the *nikah-nama* (Islamic marriage contract), which Iram signed without reading. Some guests arrived, and women surged up the stairs to try to get a look at the bride, to cries of 'Don't let them in!' Iram's aunt and I squeezed past them and were admitted to find Iram transformed in her heavily beaded red and gold *lehnga*, gold necklaces and rings, heavy make-up, and the final touches of gold glitter being sprayed onto her elaborate rolled hairstyle. 'This isn't me', she said, playing with the rings – family had given so much jewellery that she had two

rings to a finger, and her mother had kept some of the money sent by relatives in Europe to buy gold for future purchases of household items when the groom came to England.

The girls grumbled that they were hungry – there were supposed to be *samosas* (savoury filled pastries) when the *barat* arrived, and the wedding was, as is often the case, running several hours late. Then word came that the *barat* were on their way. Along with the other women, I was given a plate of rose petals, many from the garlands of the previous night, and we made our way to the entrance to the village. The groom, with an older male relative by his side, came walking down the village street from their coach and cars, followed by the rest of his relatives and friends. Shabanna, her cousin from Bristol, and another female cousin of a similar age from the village approached the groom and his uncle. In a small space in front of the cameras, with people crowding round trying for a view, Shabanna offered Hamid a sip from a cup decorated with silver foil and sequins<sup>ii</sup> and Hamid's uncle gave the girls some money. This done, the *barat* came forwards, women from their side embracing women from ours, and men doing the same. As we made our way back to the house one of the girls told me excitedly, 'I got fifteen hundred rupees – that's like a hundred and thirty pounds!'

The female guests gathered inside the courtyard to watch the display of the *burri* (Urdu) or *vurri* (Punjabi) gifts of clothes, jewellery and accessories from the groom's family to the bride. Outfit after embroidered outfit was held aloft to be inspected by the audience, followed by shoes in the latest platform styles, beauty cases and gold jewellery. The display of Iram's *burri* was followed by a meal, served to women and men separately in *shamiyanas* (decorated marquees) outside the house.

Finally we returned to the courtyard to witness Iram and Hamid sitting together as a married couple for the first time. Guests approached to put *salami* money gifts into the hands of bride and groom, and some sat beside the couple to be filmed for the wedding video. As usual, the camera had the best view. Some guests stood on chairs to get a glimpse of the couple. The wedding day is generally understood to be arduous for the bride, with the weight of her jewellery and heavily bead-worked *lehnga* under the hot lights of the film crew (filming the wedding is common amongst those who can afford it, but takes on new significance in the context of migration when relatives in the diaspora may be unable to attend in person). Iram sat unsmiling, with her head modestly down.

Eventually it was time for the *rukhsati*, when the bride is sent to her husband's home. She is normally taken out surrounded by female relatives weeping at her departure, although she will return for a short stay at her natal home the following day if her husband's home is not too distant. This time the tears were particularly numerous as the women of the family remembered that Iram's father, who had died some months before the ceremony, could not be there to see her married. When she had been escorted to the waiting car, the *barat* drove off.

### **Traditions of Opposition**

In contrast to British Christian tradition of the 'giving away' of the bride by her father, numerous Pakistani wedding customs, each of which may or may not be performed at any individual marriage, take the form of the groom paying his bride's sister in order to progress with the marriage. If the bride has no or few sisters, then other female relatives will perform this role, and at one marriage, I attended in Pakistan of an American woman with no suitable kin, those demanding payment were her female friends. Fines paid to the relatives of the bride and other attempts to delay the progress of the groom's party through a marriage are seen by many commentators as a kind of symbolic battle between the two sides, expressing tensions and differences between the families of the bride and groom. Affines (relatives through marriage) are potentially dangerous outsiders, and the challenge of a marriage is to manage this difference and create bonds of kinship or co-operation.

But in Pakistani weddings, the two 'sides' are often already closely related. For guests equally related to both the bride and groom, it can be difficult to say whether they should arrive with the *barat*, or be there to welcome them. In her 1979 book *Frogs in a Well*, on a Muslim community in North India, Patricia Jeffery reports a jovial celebration of a marriage between first cousins during which 'joking turned on the double roles which everyone could play. The bride's mother, in her role as the groom's aunt, visited her own daughter to 'see the bride's face', and the bride's brother insisted that he should arrive and be feted with the groom, his 'cousin-brother' (p173). Nevertheless, Pakistani wedding customs are 'structured around the cultural fiction of an alliance between distinct kindreds' (Werbner 1990). The elements of mock fighting at Pakistani weddings – the bribing of the bride's sisters, or the triumphal dancing of the groom's party on the *mendhi* – can be viewed as part of the way in which this distinction is created. For Pakistanis engaged in close kin marriages, such customs help create the distance needed for affinity, so that a bride is not kept within the family (which would imply incest) but given to another.<sup>iii</sup>

Money may be required before the groom can enter the marriage venue, and one particularly popular ritual, *jute* (shoes), involves the sisters of the bride seizing one of the groom's shoes and

holding it to ransom until a sufficient sum is offered. The women are being compensated for the loss of their sister, and the amounts involved can be substantial, but the playful nature of many of these practices also refers to the temporary state of joking and licensed behaviour permitted between a man and his bride's sisters (Werbner 1990: 278-9). Although Werbner writes of this as signalling the temporary incorporation of the groom into the bride's family, a phase which ends once the marriage has been consummated, during another wedding described to me, this behaviour carried on during the *walima* (reception hosted by the groom's family the following day). Asma, from the UK, narrated this part of her wedding celebrations as particularly light-hearted as cousins playfully breached conventional gendered distance:

At the end they thought, 'Oh yeah – your brother-in-law has to sit on your lap.' It's a custom or something. [I said] 'Yeah, but you haven't got no brothers', and all his cousins come over... All of them got something [money] – they were begging for it, from me... I think the youngest one has to sit on your lap, but he was too shy – he was a little baby. He's about four years old... So all of them, they start massaging my legs, saying, 'We're doing something for you!'... Some of them were men! I thought, 'Don't touch me, just have some money!' I gave them my purse – 'Just have what you want!' We had lots of fun.

In most cases, the demands for money are playful, as befits the artificial and temporary creation of opposing sides from mutual kin, but marriages can sometimes reveal underlying tensions between participants. The low 'price' eventually given for a shoe at one function during my time in Pakistan was accepted with only a little good-natured teasing, although one guest commented that this was mean considering that the groom was gaining the opportunity to go abroad through this marriage, with the implication that he would soon be earning far more and so could have afforded to be generous. In a video of another wedding I was shown, however, the haggling turned into a fairly heated argument between relatives from each side.

If there are two bridal outfits, one for the *barat* day and the other for the *walima*, one will normally be provided by the bride's family and the other by the groom's side. The bride is equipped with many sets of fancy clothes by her own family as part of her *jahez* - her beauty demonstrating their love and care for her - and is expected to appear in all her finery at dinner invitations and functions in the weeks following her marriage. This display brings prestige to her husband's family by showing that their new member is beautiful, and has brought wealth with her, and by demonstrating the expense that they themselves have lavished on her. Hence, when I met Iram at another family wedding a fortnight after her marriage and admired the many sets of gold jewellery she was

wearing, she explained that she didn't really want to wear all of it, but had been told that she should.

The wedding transfers the bride to her in-law's family, so her relationship with her parents conventionally becomes more circumscribed after marriage, although this may be less strictly observed in marriages between close kin. Where a transnational marriage involves the migration of a Pakistani groom to join a wife in the UK, however, wives often have the opportunity to retain much closer relationships with their parents and siblings than with in-laws (who usually remain overseas). One migrant husband I met negotiated this position by asking his wife to limit her daily visits to eat at her mother's house, saying that it 'didn't look nice'. Not only should her duties now lie with her husband, but providing for her was his responsibility. Migrant Pakistani wives, on the other hand, are separated from their natal families, but some still find ways of sharing the financial benefits of their migration with relatives in Pakistan, against the grain of conventions of gendered financial flows after marriage.

### **Negotiating distance**

Pakistani marriage conventions and rituals offer resources by which the necessary distance between relatives for a new relationship of marriage can be created, but emotional distance and closeness is not just displayed and assessed, but also negotiated. In transnational marriage, geographical distance plays multiple roles in these processes. Whilst some of the young British Pakistanis with whom I discussed cousin marriage were uncomfortable with what is often seen in contemporary Britain as a familial relationship too close for marriage, a seldom-met relative in Pakistan may not feel too close in practice. And while wedding rituals create separate bride's and 'groom's 'sides' from less clearly divisible networks of kin, geographical distance is among the factors that can influence where boundaries are drawn. So when Salma, in her late teens when I knew her in Pakistan, heard of the engagement of her cousin Nadir to Uzma, another first cousin but born and brought up in the UK, she shared with me her thoughts on which 'side' of the wedding she would take (as both were first cousins). Usually, she said, you would be expected to join the party of the person you are closest to (emotionally or in kinship terms). Having spent more time with cousins living in Pakistan than those in the UK, that would put her on firmly the groom's side. In this case, however, she thought she would probably be on the girl's side (*larki ki taraf*) for the wedding. Uzma, she explained, had no real sisters and so would need female friends to play their roles in the proceedings, including (she said with a grin) to demand and receive money from the groom's side. Transnational cousin marriage, in other words, adds new meanings and permutations to the careful choreographing of distance and closeness which is an inherent part of Pakistani wedding rituals.

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<sup>i</sup> A *lehnga* is a style of long skirt and top commonly worn by women for weddings. *Kusse* are traditional decorated leather shoes made to a single pattern which must be worn to mould them to fit left and right feet. The male version worn by the groom often have long extravagantly curled toes.

<sup>ii</sup> The *dudh-wali* or milk cup, but nowadays sometimes filled with cola.